

# Atonement for Racial Capitalism: The Pathway to a Socially Just San Francisco

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**When** I look back at my formative years growing up in San Francisco, California in the nineties, I have mixed emotions. I remember feeling celebrated by my diverse collective of early education instructors for being precocious and charismatic. I also remember the traumatic experience at 11 years old of being egged and called a racial slur by a man driving by. This occurred while walking with my best friend to her house in the Marina District. The Marina District of San Francisco, even in the present day, is a predominantly White and more affluent area of San Francisco. Marina Middle School was somehow different—a virtual melting pot of racially diverse children from all over the city. Students from the Mission, Chinatown, North Beach, and the Fillmore Districts all attended school with me, and we all formed a real connection that somehow transcended the realities we faced outside of school—realities based on our economic and ethnic backgrounds. The more common, historical, and present-day experience of Black people making their way through San Francisco is likened to the experience that I endured of being egged by that man. The history of Black communities in San Francisco is rife with systematic limitations of access to economic opportunities and spaces for belonging. If we are to address the historical harms that limit Black San Franciscans' thriving, we have to confront the issue of reparations. Economic reparations are the most viable solution to the harm caused by the displacement of Black communities in San Francisco. It is the

true marker of San Francisco being a socially just city.

According to the *Unfinished Agenda: The Economic Status of African Americans in San Francisco*, a study by Polaris Research and Development (PRD), Black people have been part of the social, political, and economic fabric of San Francisco as early as the Gold Rush. The population of Black people in San Francisco was relatively small in the early 1900s, but from 1940-1950, the city saw a population increase of 798 percent (PRD, 1993, p. 3). The population of Black people in San Francisco reached an all-time high by 1970—Black people represented 13.4 percent of the population (PRD, 1993, p. 3). The factors that enticed Black people, primarily from the South to San Francisco, were twofold. In the early 1900s, there was a lack of discrimination in housing and integration across the city, particularly in Japanese communities (PRD, 1993, p. 4). When World War II began, a more visible Black community in San Francisco formed because of recruitment to work in the war industry. The San Francisco Bay Area during this time was a center for shipbuilding, and there was the development of numerous military facilities such as the Oakland Army Base, the Naval Supply Center, the Alameda Naval Air Station, Treasure Island, Travis Air Force Base, and Hunters Point Shipyard (PRD, 1993, p. 4). Black migrants from the South were enticed to San Francisco to build the economy that we see today. There are stories that Kaiser advertised for workers nationwide and even sent trains through the southwest

and south to recruit workers for its shipyards. Recruiters called farmers and sharecroppers from the fields to pack up and move to California with the promise of “good jobs, more cash they had ever seen, and decent places to live” (PRD, 1993, p. 4). By the 1950s, Hunters Point and specifically the Fillmore became what people refer to as the “Harlem of the West” with a “rich street life, strong community institutions and churches, restaurants serving Black regional foods, and a range of nightclubs and cabarets that became well known for jazz and blues and other forms of African American music” (PRD, 1993, p. 5). The Black community from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s were considered prosperous times for the Black community, but that changed with the war's end and the shipyards' closure. The rate of unemployment in the Black community grew by 30 percent, and housing discrimination grew with the return of non-Black soldiers and sailors. This all set the stage for Black communities, “which had been vibrant with hope and economic vitality 15 to 20 years before,” to transition to blighted communities setting the stage for urban renewal (PRD, 1993, p. 6).

Urban renewal in San Francisco was a form of systemic racism that remains in place today with new methods and the end goal remains the same. “The practice of defining low-income, Black neighborhoods as uninhabitable have always been founded on the structure of meaning constituted by the production of classed racial hierarchy and white supremacy” (Addie & Fraser, 2019, p. 1376). As we enter

the late 60s in San Francisco, Black people who were enticed from the South to San Francisco to work in wartime industry manufacturing jobs were left behind with the transition to the new economy where government and service jobs prevailed. These jobs required different, higher-level skills, and competition was fierce (PRD, 1993, p. 9). This economic transformation in San Francisco decreased San Francisco's Black population's competitiveness and size (PRD, 1993, p. 9). Compounding disenfranchisement from the workforce, urban removal, which has been described as "Negro removal," displaced thousands of Black residents, particularly in the Western Addition. When we observe what took place in the Western Addition of San Francisco, it recalls the reality that "structural white supremacy continues to reign, despite a more inclusive definition of citizenship, and state policies continue to be implicated" (Brown & Barganier, 2018, p. 109).

San Francisco's racist land use policies in the form of urban renewal systematically limited the upward mobility of Black communities throughout the City. San Francisco has been considered widely as a "progressive" city with policies that reflect our residents' diversity to thrive. When we analyze the history of what happened to the Black community, from being lured with the promise of more income than they had ever seen during the war to being left out of the mainstream economy and having their culture, business, and domiciles stripped away — the imperative for economic reparations emerges. There are differences of opinion about the forces that created the conditions for Black San Franciscans. Capitalism is not color-blind. When you examine the roots of the destabilization of the Black community, racial capitalism is at the core of the issue. "Analyzing racial capitalism requires that

we shift our lens to consider how both ideology and history inform and are shaped by material processes — just because a situation is not popularly recognized as a racial one does not mean that it is not" (Pulido, 2016, p. 13). I have heard numerous stories, whether through the news or anecdotally, of people who have lived in a particular urban city for generations who hold rich and deep experiences in their neighborhood being disregarded and attacked when newcomers move into the area. Many will describe times past when they felt very connected to all their neighbors and could play music on the sidewalks, host block parties, sit on their stoops, and feel responsible for each other's families. This change of newcomers coming in and conflicts happening is too often trivialized as an expected and even accepted result of changing economics most characterized as "gentrification." The physical stress and psychic terror that comes along with no longer being valued in your community is too much to bear. For example, longtime residents have the police called on them for activities they have done in the neighborhood for generations. They are being excluded from opportunities for relaxation and recreation because of privatization. People who just moved to the neighborhood no longer believe longtime residents deserve to belong there. When newcomers see these residents, they may scuttle by with suspicion not even trying to look them in the eyes. This brings into question where can Black people, particularly poor Black people of color feel valued in our changing cities? Where is a safe space to call their own in the face of ever-changing economics?

Economic reparations are not new — for this to happen in San Francisco we need political will. As discussed in "Jewish and Japanese American Reparations: Political Lessons for the Africana

Community." reparations were made to the Japanese and Jewish communities for the structural harms they experienced. Why has this not happened for Black Americans? "Men are used to seeing Negroes in inferior positions; when therefore, by any chance a Negro gets in a better position, most men immediately conclude he is not fitted for it, even before he has a chance to show his fitness" (DuBois, 2015, p. 122). The rallying cry that "Black Lives Matter" can be seen and heard all around us. The realization that America, since its inception, has perpetrated atrocities and systematically excluded Black people from realizing their full potential in this country. There are some people who believe that things have gotten better for the Black community. That the government has done an excellent job implementing policies that uplift Black people and heal past harms. One has to ask is this true? Where can we see evidence of real investment in the Black community? The juxtaposition that I felt throughout my early years reflects to me the contradictions that exist for Black people in urban centers all over the United States. Being Black and especially if you are poor and Black there are fleeting moments of feeling seen and celebrated but it is too often coupled with a pervasive lack of opportunity, the devaluing of our bodies, our families, our right to participate in our democracy, a lack of justice, a safety net and at any point our lives being taken through some form of state violence and systemic racism.

Providing economic reparations emerges as the most viable solution to address the harm caused by the displacement of Black communities in San Francisco. It is an accurate marker of San Francisco being a socially just city. To compete in the ever-changing landscape of San Francisco's economics, the Black community needs access to

an equitable solution and real opportunity to compete and participate. As stated in SF Capital of the 21st Century.” Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism, “gentrification is just the fin above water. Below is the rest of the shark: a new American economy in which most of us will be poorer, a few will be far richer, and everything will be faster, more homogenous, and more controlled or controllable” (Solnit & Schwartzberg, 2018, pp. 13-14). We need our leaders to recognize the harms of the past and to create mechanisms to address those harms to communities that have been marginalized and displaced and create a reparations fund for Black San Franciscans. We know that the Bay Area has grown to be one of the wealthiest areas of our nation. That wealth, despite the systemic harm that has been done to the Black community economically over the past 100 years, has not trickled down to the Black community of San Francisco. “While people of color and immigrants earn more on average in the Bay Area than other cities and earn more at every level of education and in every industry, there is an unrelenting inequality based on gender and race” (Walker, 2018, p. 88). The time is now to move forward with this righteous economic agenda for the Black community and for San Francisco to be genuinely a socially just city. We have taken steps forward by establishing a Reparations Task Force that is looking at how San Francisco can pay the debt it owes the Black community. I believe that the only way forward is an economic imperative and to look at all avenues for the Black community to equally participate in a San Francisco that has become increasingly unaffordable for most residents.

“SF needs to establish a reparations fund, marches and

protests cannot by themselves alter the living conditions of blacks in San Francisco that are the result of decades of systemic racism. What is required to repair this historic injustice is the kind of urgent, significant action that John Lewis fought for during his career. It can and should mark the start of making long-overdue reparations to the black community, by both the private and public sectors in San Francisco.”

- Rev. Dr. Amos C. Bro

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